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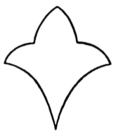
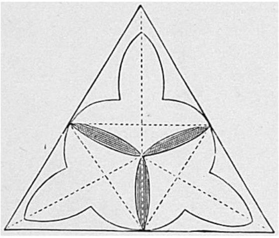
DECORATIVE DESIGNING.

THE records of history, from the earliest times till our own day, bear their testimony that symbolical picture-writing is an instinctive language of mankind. This picture-writing is not in imitation of natural forms, but all nations, from the wildest savages of Africa to the Sandwich-Islanders of the present time—the peoples of the remotest antiquity while history was in its twilight, as well as the most civilised races—have resorted to certain conventionalisations of real objects to express their ideas in a more or less complete artistic shape. This mode of expression, as universal as the human race, includes various degrees of representation of natural things, from the rude hieroglyphics of Egyptian architecture, in which three or four lines arranged in peculiar combinations indicate men or animals, to the elaborate carved processions of winged bulls with the faces of men, which decorated the palaces of Nineveh, and had a spiritual significance to their authors. In modern days we see nearly everywhere the conventionalised scroll-work that ornaments the pillars of our greatest buildings, in the cathedrals and city-halls of the past few centuries. We all remember the exquisite carving on the capitals of some of the famous pillars of the Doge's Palace at Venice, and the tracery which suggests acanthus-leaves to such perfection that only the closest observer can make out that the rounded figures, which cut with their delicate edges the shadows they enclose, are not literal imitations of Nature, but only their adapted representation.



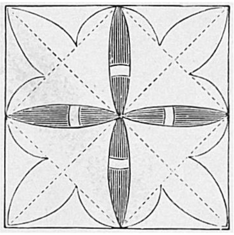
Trefoil Base of Designs.

Between the rudimentary form of the ancient Egyptian ibis and the carefully-detailed animals which make the embellished gargoyles on the cathedrals of Cologne, Strasburg, or Amiens, the difference of detail is so striking that one compares the first of them to child's work, while the elaborateness of the latter clearly shows the discriminating thought of a full-grown man, though both equally indicate by their conventionalised peculiarity the influence of that Art which, as Emerson says, is "Nature passed through the alembic of man." It is only of late years, under the influence of Mr. Ruskin, and the set of thinkers of his realistic tendency, that people have fallen into the error of supposing that Art is properly a servile imitation of natural objects, in which ideas of symmetry and geometrical proportion are ignored; and the erratic irregularity into which this chase after Nature has run shows us at once the hopelessness of the pursuit and its failure to realise a complete or satisfying result.



No. 1.

But in every period of time a true artistic end has been accomplished when the well-observed features of natural objects have been chronicled within the conventionalised limits of a few geometrical rules, that include proportion, symmetry, and a proper subordination of one part of the figure to another. The Bible commandment, "Thou shalt not make to thee any graven image, nor any likeness of anything in heaven above or in the earth beneath," so literally obeyed in the Mohammedan religion, has brought into distinct prominence in the Art of Mohammedan nations the characteristics that belong to conventionalisation. The arabesques of the Saracens, which represent neither animal nor vegetable Nature, but only combinations of abstract lines, are graceful, grotesque, or picturesquely irregular, and contain all the principles requisite to fuse natural objects into the formality of artistic compositions. The existence of this peculiarity, which is present in all good work, is frequently not perceived by the ignorant student who examines the rich carved tracery of leaves, or animals, or men, which constitutes the elegance and beauty of so much of the mediæval Christian architecture. Such a person does not observe how the lines in a flower or beast not only form the leaves of the one and the limbs of the other, but that their twisted forms apparently bind an arch or strengthen the supports of a column. He does not see that the involved curves in a rose-window lead the sight towards the central figure of a heavenly dove or the Divine Eye, and that the lengthened tendrils of a vine heighten the column around which they cling.



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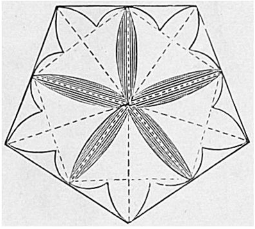

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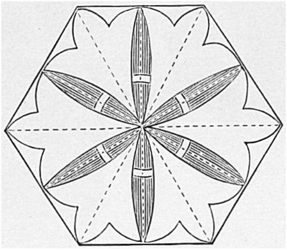
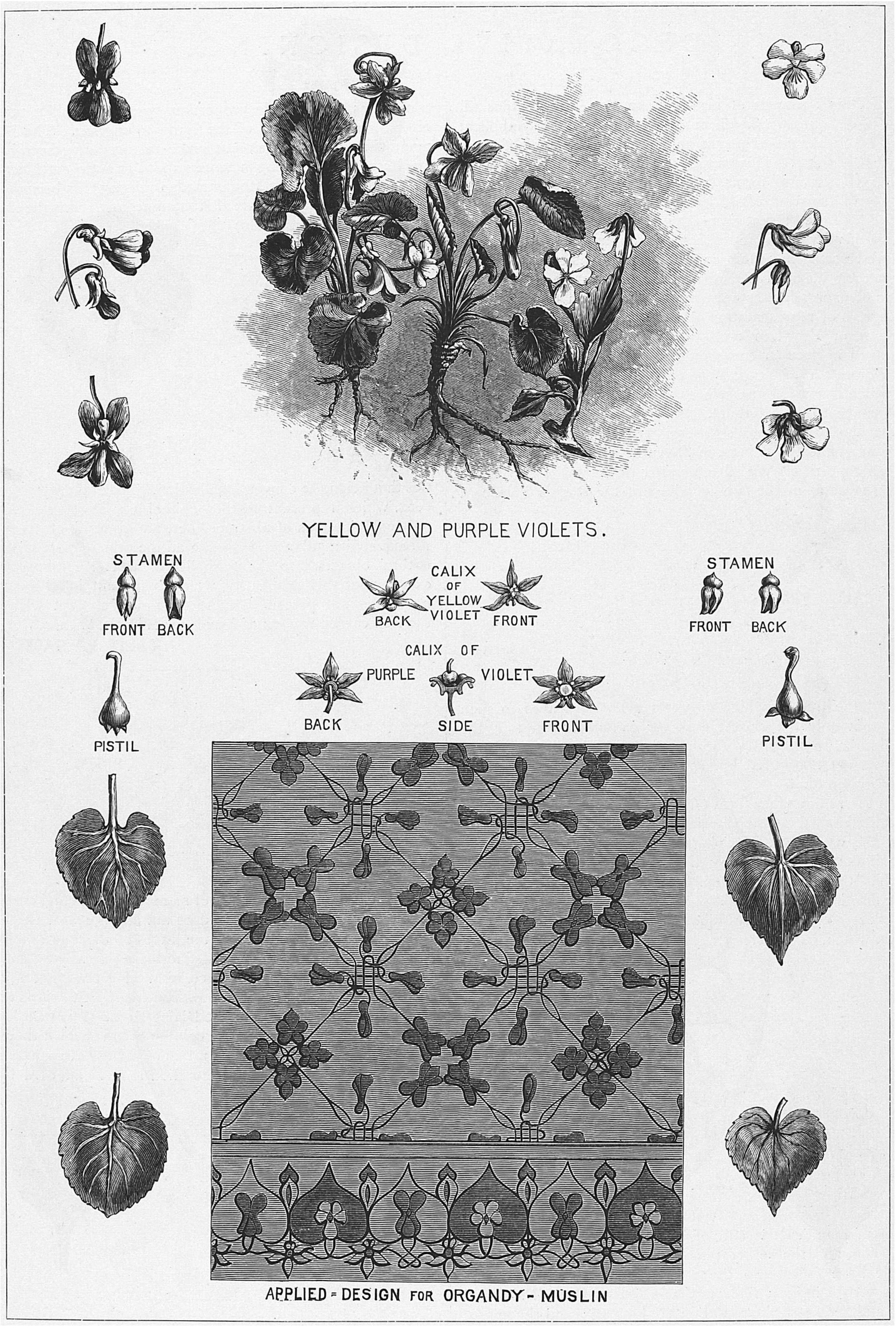


No. 4.

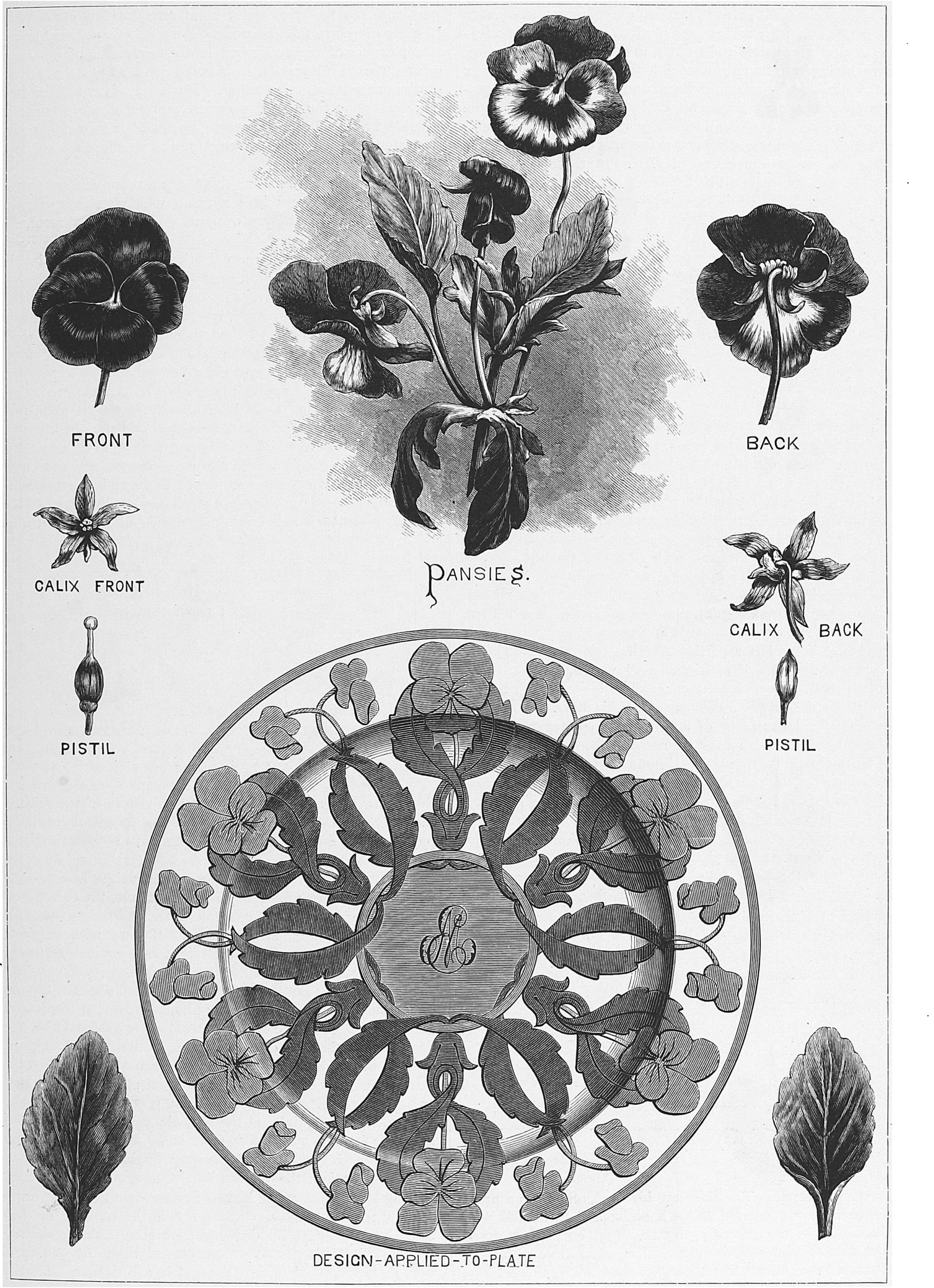
We recollect no better illustration of the use of natural forms for the purpose of geometrical decoration than is afforded by the numerous niched statues on the Cathedral of Milan. Seen from a distance too great to admit the distinctive features of the saints or priests to appear, the multitude of perpendicular lines, long and short, of every conceivable variety, that constitute these images,



Application of Natural Forms to Design for Fabrics.

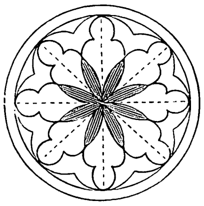
covers the vast walls of this edifice with a tracery in an almost perfect semblance of Honiton lace.

Of late years, reacting from a servile imitation of Nature, the English, and more recently the Americans, have awakened to the importance of studying general combinations of form, if they expect to arrive at anything satisfactory in design; and this endeavour



Application of Natural Forms to Design on Porcelain.

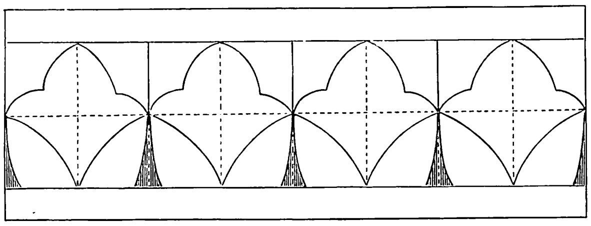
shows itself in the effort that is making to teach children in all the schools to draw well, and to *think* as well as to draw, so that from such an education there may arise a class of ideas which shall in the future beautify our manufactures and ennoble our surroundings. Starting from the principle of a formal basis to his pattern, the first step for the designer in black-and-white is to learn and use such combinations of angular figures as are simple and easily analysed. This class of patterns makes the pleasant tessellated forms on floor-cloths, the arabesques of tilework, and the honeycomb shapes that give grace and beauty to a ceiling or a cornice. To learn such simple and comprehensible figures, some knowledge of angles, vertical and horizontal lines, and proportions, is requisite, and afterwards these pictures are easily made and produce the charming results which are seen in the decoration of Moorish edifices, and which constitute the agreeable features of some structures that stand at the very top of decorative Art. In these really simple though apparently elaborate geometrical ornaments, no natural forms, or suggestions of natural forms, appear, but the grace of a brass screen, the iron filigree of a candlestick, or the tessellated marble pavement of a floor, consists in such lacings and interlacings of straight lines as make the metal resemble a cobweb in delicacy, or the stone tracery simulate the exquisiteness of frost-work. We are all familiar with the loveliness of snow-flakes, and we know the pleasure to be derived from watching the little crosses of the ice-filaments when they mingle and interweave with one another. Nature, in such cases, resorts to only the simplest means, but from them she evolves combinations of almost endless charm, and the mind is never wearied of studying them.


No. 5.

In the example before us we furnish an illustration of a simple geometrical figure, which, if multiplied and varied, can easily be made to produce an agreeable pattern; and it is from such beginnings as this that the experimenter can make his start.

The designs afford examples of a number of patterns, adapted to different purposes, which may be realised from a conventionalised trefoil, arranged with varying bounding-lines. In the first of these shapes (No. 1), that of an equilateral triangle, each side is divided by a dot, and from the centre of the triangle lines are drawn to each angle, and from the dot in the middle of each side to the opposite sides of the figure. The geometrical plan of the design is thus laid out, and the figure is easily filled in, by drawing simple curves from the centre of the form to the dot on each side of it, and, lastly, filling in the form of the trefoil a little below the point of each corner of the triangle.

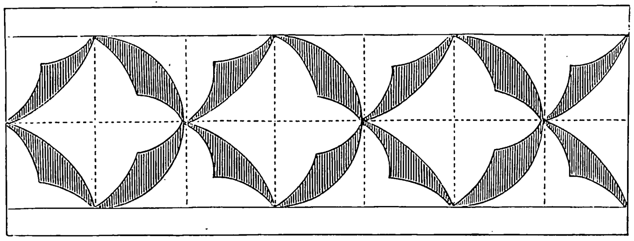
The square (No. 2), which is the next form, is developed in much the same manner. The sides are bisected, and from a point in the centre lines are carried to each angle and to all the dots on the sides. As in the preceding figure, slight curves are made on either of the side-lines, and the trefoil is added to each angle, with the base of the middle leaf touching the transverse working-lines between the sides. It will be seen that the pentagon (No. 3) and the hexagon (No. 4) also are formed in the same general manner, but the proportion of the top of the trefoil varies from its sides.


No. 6.

In drawing the circular rosette (No. 5), the circumference should be constructed on a vertical and an horizontal diameter, with two other diameters bisecting it at equal angles, which divide it into eight sections, the half-diameters, upon all of which curved lines and the top of the trefoil are made. A series of arcs may be added at the pleasure of the designer. In the two pieces of moulding (No. 6 and No. 7), the trefoil is inserted vertically to the sides in one and horizontally in the other. In the latter, a half of the trefoil is added upon the sides to enrich the elementary figure; and the double line and the transverse lines which form the squares are repeated for the sake of symmetry, and as affording an impression of agreeable repose.

It is from such a basis as this that all these various patterns are derived, and they produce a result which an inexperienced eye, unaccustomed to analyse designs, could scarcely resolve into its elements.

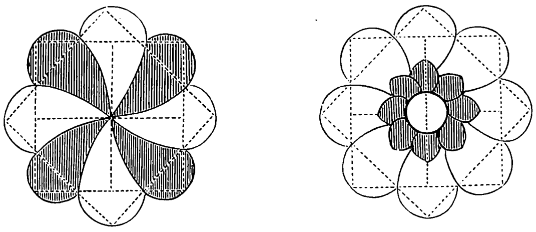
We come now to a more intricate figure, which involves the several conventionalised forms of various parts of the common wild purple and yellow violets. Page 210 shows entire plants drawn from Nature, including their roots, buds, and blossoms, as well as the leaves. We have also on the same page a front view and a back view of a blossom of each, and of two buds, one more rudimentary than the other, and the green leaves also appear with their back and front. Applied design, where the pattern is at all involved, necessitates a botanical analysis where plant-forms are concerned; for the stamens, the calyx, and the pistil, have each a form of their own, which can be so used as to fill up and enrich a pattern whose chief features consist of the flowers and large leaves of the plant. In the figure before us there is a front and a back view of a stamen of the purple violet, in which the calyx is seen in its two positions; and on the right side of the page the parts of the yellow violet also appear. At the bottom of the print we have the conventionalised plants applied for a design of muslin or wall-paper, and it now remains for the reader to resolve the pattern into its component parts.


No. 7.

The first thing which strikes one is, that the whole design is constructed on the geometrical basis of squares, the corners of which are filled up in turns by the purple or the yellow blossoms, the wide-open and the half-open buds of both flowers, with suggestions of the pistil, filling the end of the straight lines against the flower-buds. The border of the pattern shows the green leaves against which are relieved the two flowers, and the stamen enriches the otherwise plain points. Between the heart-shaped leaves, at the outer edge of the border which instinct and custom show us should be closer and heavier than the rest of the pattern, so that it may support all the forms which it encloses, are seen conventionalised calyxes in little star-shapes, whose sharp points contrast pleasantly with the curves and rounded forms that for the most part compose the figure. It may not be perceptible, at the first glance of the uninstructed eye, that the forms which make up this figure are different from the natural drawing of the objects; but in this case, equally with the preceding design, the conventionalisation of the form consists in making both sides of the leaves, flowers, and the other elements of the plant, exactly alike. So we see, in the outlines of the purple violet, that where in the drawing from Nature the right leaf of the lower portion is lower and more curved than the one on the left side, in the applied design the petals are similar. The last fact which it is desirable to consider is the curve and action of the stems of the flower, and in the picture before us the interlacing of lines at the corners of the squares by the flower-buds suggests the natural twist of the stalks of the violet.

The sheet of drawings of the pansy affords an example of the same sort of analysis of a natural plant into its parts; and the circular pattern at the foot of the page gives one of the many adapted figures to which it may be applied.

If harmony of form is the first object to be considered in design, the colouring into which these forms are combined is only second to it in importance. We have said that certain dispositions of lines apparently strengthen an arch or lengthen a column; and colour in its turn developes the force of a figure. While a yellow warm hue makes more prominent the tracery on a ceiling or a capital, cool blue causes the parts to retire. To understand the theory of colour is of great importance to the practical designer, and, though instinct teaches a great deal, and a want of sense of colour can never be supplied, certain general principles are of accepted value, and their right application surely gives excellence and effect to any pattern in which they are employed. For the effectiveness of a design, colour developes the different parts of a form, and, especially at a distance, separates one portion from the rest. It also assists the light and shade, and rightly distributed it gives the undulation of shading. Every painter is aware of the importance of balancing a sharp point of colour by a series of different greys or demi-tints, and the secret of repetition of tints through various portions of pictures is well understood. These principles, which apply so well to high Art, are equally true when used for decoration; and the same colours which make a landscape composition delightful give interest to a wall-pattern or a tessellated ceiling or floor.



No. 8.—*Varieties of Rosettes constructed on Similar Plans.*

Very few persons understand the fact that a small bit of one of the primary colours, red, blue, or yellow, is sufficient to balance a large surface of the secondary shades, of green, purple, or orange, and that a still larger surface must be covered with the tertiary tints, of olive (composed of green and purple), or russet (of orange and purple), or citrine (which is the compound of orange and green), to support and give effectiveness to small points of the pure colours. On the same principle, if a light and bright tint is contrasted with another of a lower tone, the amount of surface covered by the latter colour must be proportionately increased. Many flat designs are so contrived as to give the appearance of forming raised or retiring surfaces, and in such cases as these the experimenter should remember that yellow or the yellowish tints make a form apparently project, that red is best on the undersides, and that blue is proper for the concave or retiring surfaces. The result of all these different admixtures is, to give as far as possible a tender bloom to any design, when it is viewed from a distance, and when the details are so indistinct that they all mingle and mellow into an indefinite mass.

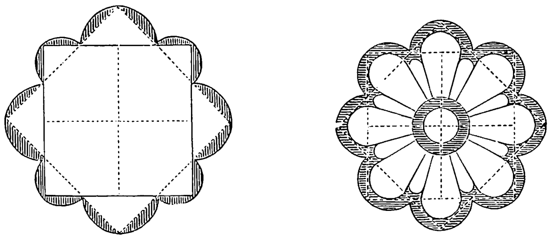
The principle should be borne in mind that no composition can be complete when either of the primary colours is wanting, either in its crude state or commingled with other tones. It is well known that, when two tones of the same colour are used side by side, the darker one will appear darker, and the lighter one lighter, than if seen apart; and if a red, blue, or yellow, be placed by a grey, the grey will take the complementary colour to the primary which is used. If a red pattern be painted on a grey ground, the grey will appear greenish, green being the complementary, as it is composed of blue and yellow. In the same manner a blue figure traced on grey will appear orange, and red and yellow commingled. Colours on white grounds look darker, and on black grounds lighter, than when seen apart. When coloured ornaments are on a ground of contrasting colour, they should be separated from it by a lighter line of colour. A yellow flower on a purple ground will be more effective if it be edged with a line of lighter yellow; and ornaments of any colour may be separated from their backgrounds by a lining of white, gold, or black. If a colour of one degree of brightness be used on a dark ground of the same colour, it need not be outlined to be effective; but, if the figure is darker than the groundwork, it needs the relief of a still deeper coloured margin.

It would seem natural that, the further civilisation advances, the more true will be the artistic instinct for decoration. Experience shows that the converse of this is the case universally; and while in the early stages of nations decorators put down in their ornaments simple facts as they see them, and form in flat masses of primary colours their flowers, leaves, and other objects, the nations of Asia and of Africa, as their ideas have developed, have substituted magentas and dull solferinos for their beautiful and vivid vermilions and blues, and the rich and warm Algerine rugs and blankets are so dimmed with ugly secondary and tertiary shades that we may almost fear that the glory of the Orient is passing away with this generation, and that its pure and artistic instincts are to give place to the dull results of the false reasoning of ignorant Europeans, who are corrupting the sense of Egypt and of India by their importations into those countries of ugly calicoes or still uglier woollens. When the artistic instinct has been purest, the use of the primary colours in flat masses has been universal, but in the decadence of Art everywhere the secondary shades have crept into decorative work.

If the designer has come somewhat to comprehend from our analysis the few underlying facts of geometrical form, and the general use of colour which makes conventionalised design pleasant in hue as well as graceful in outline, the few hints that will close this analysis of design will not be without their value.

In regard to the classes of objects which need ornament, it should be always borne in mind that we like to adorn that for which we care most. To lavish on a beloved being all the pleasant and pretty things in our power, is the first impulse of the heart; and a similar instinct leads human beings, from the wild savage who decorates his arrow-heads or his canoes to the child of the highest civilisation who fancies costly books or the finest embroidery, to make those things the most beautiful to which they are most attached. The character of ornament depends upon the genius of a nation, and is always impressed with its leading ideas; and race and religion influence design largely. As an instance of this, the Egyptians were a severe people, and their ornament is characterised by straight lines and rigid and regular forms. The Greeks worshipped beauty, and their ornament has come down to us as the most graceful of any time in history. The Roman architectural designs had a barbaric richness, which partook of their own vigorous but luxury-loving character; while the French decoration of the eighteenth century is as graceful, as showy, and as meretricious as the court of Louis XIV., which saw it in its flower. It is difficult to know when a style is being formed. We can look into the past and separate the various styles clearly, but there have been times when such a lukewarmness and lack of interest has pervaded Art, that vague tradition or imitation alone has usurped the place of a live growth of native ornament.

Formerly, the great artists realised the importance of decoration, and recognised that the same general principles which were required to model a beautiful statue, or to colour a fine painting, entered into the composition of a lovely salt-cellar, or would be charming in the wall-decoration of a room. Hence we see the works of Cellini ranging from his 'Perseus,' one of the most striking pieces of Art in existence, to a chased candlestick. Michael Angelo's settings of arabesque-work which frame the grand frescoes in the Sistine Chapel are only subordinate in excellence to the Prophets



No. 9.—*Varieties of Rosettes constructed on Similar Plans.*

and Sibyls they enclose; while the critical visitor often may doubt whether he prefers the ornamental works of Raphael, in the *loggie* of the Vatican, or his paintings upon the walls, so full of grace, of beauty, and complete elegance, are the former.

The student of design will succeed best by making himself familiar not only with the general character of natural objects, but also with the accidental conditions which frequently befall certain of the vegetable forms. As a case in point, lovers of Nature may have often remarked how some of the grasses die at their base, while their tops shoot up new green blades, leaving a mass of drooping dead and withered leaves clinging to the ground. This is especially observable in the marsh-grass of salt meadows, whose clean-cut forms make them especially suitable for decorative purposes. If the experimenter should make use only of the live parts, he would lose half his opportunities of beautiful and picturesque effect, which he might improve by introducing the proper contrast of the fresh and the shrivelled blades. The same is true of pine-branches with their fresh whorls above and the brown, crushed needles underneath. In Nature also certain features of plants are much more sparingly used than others; and the same reason which makes roses scattered among green leaves more charming than when a branch is thick-set with flowers should lead the designer to proportion his conventionalised pattern with more leaves than blossoms. Such peculiarities as the greater size of the trunk than the branches of a tree should always be noted in good design; and the setting of leaves opposite each other in their stems, in whorls, or in alternate places, should be strictly regarded.

Repetition in conventionalised designs has quite a contrary effect upon the mind and eye from the too frequent duplicating of natural objects. We have spoken above of the necessity of graceful curves in arabesque, and have dwelt upon their importance in the underlying plan of designs from natural objects. It is this arabesque which the mind appreciates, though it may be unconscious of the source of its satisfaction; and where the curves and the geometrical forms are pleasing it scarcely matters what details form the picture, whether a rose and a rose-leaf repeat themselves continually, or if the more ambitious designer has mingled with them all the flowers of the garden.

Ornament should be adapted to the use to which it is applied, and we ought not to use fountains of flowers spouting water, nor vistas of flowers, seen in aërial perspective, apparently retreating under our feet in carpets or floor-cloths. The latter vicious kind of pattern is one of the most common in the Brussels carpets made ten or fifteen years ago. Flat-tinted flowers on a solid bed of moss may be agreeable on the floor over which we tread; but the absurdity of walking over vines that come forward or retreat from our steps cannot be sufficiently deprecated.

The light and shade on designs should be very simple, and flat colours and flat massing are much more suitable to a wall-pattern, or a dress, or a floor-cloth, than figures seen in perspective. The French decoration of the last century and the German of the present day are very deficient in this point of excellence. Floating figures in the air, festoons of vines and flowers greying into blue distance, and an endless variety of advancing and retreating figures in positive light and shadow, destroy all idea of repose or fitness in the side-walls of rooms, and in carvings of wood, and even in the small ornamental decoration of china or of jewellery.

The ornament which covers a surface should fill rather more than half its space, and the plain portions ought themselves to be beautified enough to relieve them from any suspicion of baldness or paucity.

Such are a few of the thoughts which should influence the experimenter in design, and which, followed out intelligently through the aid of study of natural objects and books, have led to the marked improvement in England in all decoration. We have now begun to realise, more positively than ever before, that it is not imitation of natural objects, nor even of the Art of the past, which should legitimately beautify our own times, but that an understanding of the principles which guided the designers of former generations will of necessity lead to good designing among our own people.

S. N. C.

MOORISH, PERSIAN, AND RHODIAN GLAZED POTTERY.

BY CHARLES WYLLYS ELLIOTT.

BEFORE giving some particulars of the interesting examples of pottery which have come to us from the Arabs and the Moors of Spain, it may be well to devote a few moments to the people themselves.

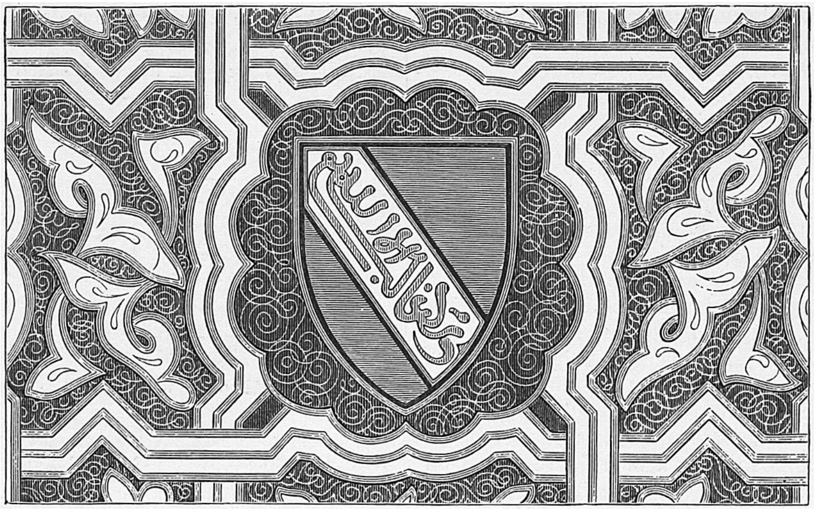


Fig. 1.—*From the Alhambra.*

I have thought it well to group under one head a number of their productions, because they are peculiar, and because they seem to have sprung from one centre, or to have grown up under a corresponding sense of the beautiful, so different from that of other peoples.